

**Public Testimony to Massachusetts Commission
to Review Statutes Relative to Implementation of the School Bullying Law**

Gardner Auditorium, State House, Boston

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

Attorney General Coakley, Representative Walz, and distinguished members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Mary Ann Stewart. I am a parent of three students in Massachusetts public K-12 and higher ed schools. I am also State President of the Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association, an affiliate of National PTA, the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy association in the country. Massachusetts PTA celebrated its centennial last year and currently has about 108 local PTAs in 55 communities with about 15,000 members.

For over 100 years, National PTA has been a proud voice for children. From universal kindergarten to a juvenile justice system, PTA advocates have been at the heart of our nation's greatest advances for youth. Today, we speak up for family engagement language in laws; safe, healthy, and technologically advanced schools; and equal opportunity for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

For too long bullying had gone unchallenged, with parents, who are often unaware of the bullying problem, neglecting to talk about it with their children; with students feeling that adult intervention is infrequent and ineffective and will only bring more harassment from bullies; and with school personnel viewing bullying as a harmless rite of passage that is best ignored.

The legislation that was swiftly enacted last year was a good start. However, we know we need a multi-pronged approach to change acculturated behaviors. If we are serious about changing school culture, and we all are, legislation needs strengthening. This can be supported in three ways: incorporating enumeration to the law, along with DESE's proposed guidelines for parental notification, and providing resources that are vital for training and prevention in schools and communities.

- Enumeration is an element currently missing from Massachusetts' anti-bullying law. States that have enumeration in their laws have fewer reported cases of bullying. And while actual or perceived LGBT students are frequently targeted, students with actual or perceived race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender identity/expression, intellectual ability, physical appearance, or a mental, physical or sensory disability or disorder, or on the basis of association with others identified by these categories, are also targets.
- Through Mass PTA's collaboration with Greater Boston/PFLAG, we have helped to spread the life-saving work of Caitlin Ryan, PhD, ACSW, and the Family Acceptance Project on the impact of negative/rejecting parental behavior toward their LGBT

children. PFLAG's pro-active presence with others to DESE helped to create new guidance for schools to create an excellent parental notification plan. However, that plan is advisory - - it needs to be given the force of law.

- School leaders need resources for implementing effective comprehensive school-wide programs to address the issue with children, educators, families, and community members. School-wide programs that are collaboratively developed with all stakeholders seek to change the school's culture to emphasize respect and eliminate bullying.

National PTA and Massachusetts PTA support policies and programs that address the prevention, intervention, and elimination of bullying. Bullying in schools is a pervasive problem that can have negative consequences for the school climate and for the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear, and one that can have negative lifelong consequences, both for students who bully and for their targets.

The costs of bullying are high. Unfortunately, many children suffer alone, keeping their bullying experiences to themselves. By strengthening the law through enumeration and thoughtful parental notification plans and by providing resources to schools and communities we can change that dynamic. I sincerely hope we do.

Thank you very much,

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